

THE GREAT COWBOY STRIKE OF 1883

Class War in the Wild West & the Reconstruction of Power in the Texas Panhandle

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Most sources tell us the same thing about the strike of rural livestock laborers in the Texas panhandle during the spring of 1883. Writers regularly describe it erroneously as “the only cowboy strike in history.” The most easily accessible accounts sketch a tragicomic tale of desperate, ungrateful and ignorant cowboys riding off the job into town where they spent what they had on bad whiskey and loose women before crawling back to their employers only to find their places filled by newcomers. The defeated strikers subsequently had to move from the area or to resort to rustling and outlawry, so the authorities or extralegal regulators hired by the big ranchers had to hunt them down and dispatch them as part of bringing law and order to the Old West.¹ In all its essentials, such accounts are simply incorrect,

For this reason, their early job action merits a closer examination. In fact, cowboys held an incredible power, and the strike reflected their realization of this. How and why this event came to be told the way it was must be explored as well. Finally, we can take a clearer look at this seemingly trivial and singular incident in the wider historical perspective of development.

Cowboy Power

Cowboys have become iconic in the culture of western societies as a symbol of--among other things--a rugged American individualism. Rugged it was. The first statisticians of labor in the U.S described a 108-hour work-week. Allowing them a daily slot of eight hours which had to have been spent mostly in sleep, this meant working

¹DeArment, *Deadly Dozen*, 157; Lewis Nordsyke, *Great Roundup: the Story of Texas and Southwestern Cowmen* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1955), 110-11, addressed in Weston, *The Real American Cowboy*, 99-100.

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sixteen hours a day Monday through Saturday coupled to a leisurely twelve hours on Sunday. However, individualism proved incapable of managing massive herds of cattle, a process that cultivated teamwork and solidarity.

The great bonanzas in the cattle business from the mid-1870s forged a work force that included Indians, Hispanics and African-Americans. In the Panhandle, though young Southern white boys fleeing the impact of defeat in the Civil War predominated, and may well have been the least likely of contemporary labor militants. As brutal and brutalizing as their lot in life usually was, it frequently involved the hope of gathering in a few mavericks to start their own little herds and eventually becoming their own boss on their own little ranch. The reality of such aspirations changed as the cattle boom imploded, and the big ranchers began fencing the open range and actively discouraging even the smallest scale competitors. This framed the decision to strike. Quipped the *Leadville Daily Herald*. “This is a form of devilry of which the cowboys has [sic] hitherto been innocent.”²

Cowboys understood their own power. The regional press, entirely unsympathetic to labor and strikers, flattered them in print. A New Mexico explained why:

It would be hardtop imagine any other class of employees who can more completely control the situation than the Texas cowboys. Their places cannot be well supplied, at least, in a short time. It takes men who know the country, and who retrained to the ranges, to be efficient in the business.

A good cowboy, it explained “must know the landmarks, mesas, patches of timber, peaks and outlines of the landscape.” He had to know “the location of water

² Untitled item, *Leadville Daily Herald*, March 28, 1883, 2. See also: Weston, *The Real American Cowboy*, 99-104; McCarty, *Maverick Town*, 107-14, though actually only starts on 109; Ruth Alice Allen, *Chapters in the History of Organized Labor in Texas* (University of Texas Publication 4143, Austin, 1941). B. Byron Price, “Community of Individualists: The Panhandle Stock Association, 1881–1891,” in *At Home on the Range*, ed. John R. Wunder (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1985). Donald F. Schofield, *Indians, Cattle, Ships, and Oil: The Story of W. M. D. Lee* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985); Robert E. Zeigler, “Cowboy Strike of 1883,” *Handbook of Texas Online* (<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/oec02>), accessed October 10, 2014. Uploaded on June 12, 2010. Published by the Texas State Historical Association;

holes, springs and the course and distances of the streams,” and, of course, fit enough to live in the outdoors “with nothing but his blanket.”³

None understood this better than the wagon bosses, the better paid experienced cowboys who coordinated the work crews and regularly dealt with all the men. They also provided the leadership of the strike, particularly a twenty-three year old Alabama born foreman at the LS Ranch, Tom Harris met with other wagon bosses--Waddy Peacock for the LIT and Roy Griffin for the LX—to organize two dozen of the men to sign a written agreement that they would not work for less than \$50 a month for herders and \$75 for crew leaders. Harris himself was said to be making \$100 a month himself, which, if so, makes his course all the more admirable. As one newspaper reported, they chose “a very critical time for such trouble, as preparations for the season’s drive are at hand,” that is, “at the beginning of the spring round-up.”⁴

As a general manager on one big ranch recalled, the men acted “a trying moment, because we had a herd of beef just about ready to start to market.” When the boss refused their terms, “they turned their horses, gave a cowboy yell, waved their Stetsons in the air and made a bee-line for the headquarters.” That night, the boss claimed that he heard “a good deal of talk about lynching or licking or tar and feathering, and, as a prelude they fired off their revolvers.” After “a bit of a pow-wow” in the morning, the cowboys in the other outfits rode off. In this case, the manager described himself as being “at a disadvantage, work had to be shoved forward, they were obliged to brand their calves and gather beef, and as they had no time to get more men, were obliged to comply with the demands of the strikers and restore their wages.”⁵

Telling the Tale

Aside from a few notices elsewhere, the main surviving primary sources on the 1883 cowboy strike are the newspaper accounts starting March 26 that appeared from Kentucky to California, usually reprinted an article that had appeared in a regional paper.

³ Untitled item, *Las Vegas Daily Gazette*, March 28, 1883, 4.

⁴ McCarty, *Maverick Town*, 109, 110, 111; DeArment, *Deadly Dozen*, 156-57; Zeigler, “Cowboy Strike of 1883,” as well as “Cowboys on a Strike,” and Untitled item, *Las Vegas Daily Gazette*, March 27 (p. 1), 28 (p. 4), 1883.

⁵ Qtd. Weston, *The Real American Cowboy*, 96, 97-98.

The bulk of these represented a simple passive transcriptions of whatever the employers wanted the public to believe. While this may be true of most labor actions, the isolation of the strike left the employers an especially unchecked monopoly when it came to documenting the strike, which they exercised it without any restraint. The *Texas Live Stock Journal* described the mere plans for a strike as “threats of lawlessness.” Based on these accounts, historians have described a two-and-a-half month strike against five ranches.⁶

Fortunately, the Federal Commissioner of Labor actually obtained solid information on the strike to incorporate into its statistical view of “Strikes and Lockouts” in those years. Because the officials who compiled these regularly acknowledged when they not know the details of the strike they describe, when they offer real information it is generally very reliable. Too, a few of newspaper accounts from outside of the area sustain the Federal report that the strike that ran from March 23 to April 4 against seven of the big ranches, who reportedly lost nearly \$4000 in refusing the settle.⁷ So the strike was over in twelve days rather than lasting roughly seventy-five days, give or take a month or so.

Notwithstanding the press accounts, it is also doubtful that the bosses “imported a lot of men from the east, but the cowboys surrounded the newcomers and will not allow them to work.” Accounts of strikebreakers became essential to accounts seeded in the press that the striking cowboys, “armed with Winchester rifles and six shooters” threatened any who would take their positions with violence and death. A California paper, “The lives of all who attempt to work for less than the amount demanded are in great danger,” declared a California paper. A Fort Worth dispatch from the Western Associated Press to Chicago assured readers that the strikers “threaten to kill any new men, to fire ranches and work general trouble.” By the time the story reached Kentucky, the papers called it “the most vicious strike that has been organized lately” because the cowboys “promise to murder anybody who take their place.”⁸

⁶“A Cowboy Strike [from *Texas Live Stock Journal*],” *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, March 29, 1883, 6; Zeigler, “Cowboy Strike of 1883”;

⁷ Strike for wage increase, no organization, seven employers. March 23-April 4, 1883. Won, employers lost 3,835. 328 strikers, earning \$1.18 per day at start, attained \$1.68 per day. Work week ran to 105 hours. *Third Annual Report of the Commissioner of Labor, 1887: Strikes and Lockouts* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1888), 580-81, 582-83.

⁸ Lewis Nordyke, *Great Roundup: the Story of Texas and Southwestern Cowmen* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1955), 110-11, addressed in Weston, *The Real American Cowboy*, 99-100; “Cowboys

Integral to threats against strikebreakers was the danger the strike posed to property. The Sacramento paper reported threats “to cut the fence and burn the ranches if their demands are not acceded to.” The *Texas Live Stock Journal* concurred that “the talk is of range burning, and wire-fence-cutting if their demand is not granted.” The introduction of the term “fence-cutting” proved very significant, because the practice already involved violent range wars across parts of the Southwest. Capping this all, the owners told the press that, should they not prevail in defending their property and their new strikebreaking employees, they would act “to secure United States troops and Texas rangers” to break the strike.⁹

Like the reports of a long strike, none of the reported particulars of its course are correct. Of a striking cowboy, the *Las Vegas Gazette* wisely noted that “a stranger cannot take his place simply for the lack of the technical knowledge of the profession.” A neophyte, it continued, “is more liable to wander estray[sic] himself and be forever lost on the boundless plains, than to find stray cattle.” New men would be of no use without old hands to direct their work.¹⁰ More fundamentally, these spring roundups took place far from the larger towns and railheads where even incompetent replacements might be hired, and this certainly could not have happened in the short strike reported by the Commissioner of Labor.

If wrong about the duration and course of the strike, these accounts also understated the involved. All agreed that about two dozen signed the strike agreement near Tascosa, the epicenter of the movement. The newspapers variously reported 100 cowboys involved-

on a Strike,” *Leadville Daily Herald*, March 27, 1883, 1; “Trouble with the Cowboys,” *Sacramento Daily Union*, March 26, 1883, 4; Cowboys Strike,” *Las Vegas Daily Gazette*, April 20, 1883, 1, essentially repeated as: “Cowboy’s Strike,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, April 20, 1883, 1; “Cowboy’s Strike,” *St. Paul Daily Globe*, April 26, 1883, 3; McCarty, *Maverick Town*, 112-13; Untitled item, *Stanford KY Semi-weekly Interior Journal*, April 27, 1883, 2.

⁹“Trouble with the Cowboys,” *Sacramento Daily Union*, March 26, 1883, 4; “A Cowboy Strike [from *Texas Live Stock Journal*],” *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, March 29, 1883, 6; “Cowboys on a Strike,” *Leadville Daily Herald*, March 27, 1883, 1; “Cowboys Strike,” *Las Vegas Daily Gazette*, April 20, 1883, 1, essentially repeated as: “Cowboy’s Strike,” *Omaha Daily Bee*, April 20, 1883, 1; “Cowboy’s Strike,” *St. Paul Daily Globe*, April 26, 1883, 3. Also: Untitled item, *Stanford KY Semi-weekly Interior Journal*, April 27, 1883, 2; and, on Governor Roberts, “The Panhandle Trouble,” *Las Vegas Daily Gazette*, April 19, 1883, 4; Zeigler, “Cowboy Strike of 1883.”

¹⁰ Untitled item, *Las Vegas Daily Gazette*, March 28, 1883, 4; “The Panhandle Trouble,” *Las Vegas Daily Gazette*, April 19, 1883, 4.

-or 160, 200, or between 200 to 300. Perhaps, these differences may reflect the growth of the strike numbers over time, but most likely the numbers came from the ranchers who deliberately understated the numbers. I have not found the larger totals in Texas papers. The brief but authoritative notice of the Commissioner of Labor very specifically counted 328 strikers.¹¹

To clarify what this meant, those numbers meant that about three-quarters of the voting population of Oldham County, Texas had gone on strike.

Winners & Losers

The desire of the employers to shape an understanding of the strike to discourage its repetition is nowhere more evident than in newspaper accounts of the strike's defeat. The *Dodge City Times*, reported: "Those of the strikers who could obtain employment have gone to work and others have left the country. We understand that a number of the most prominent and violent ones have been refused work on the range and have been forced to abandon the country to secure employment."¹² Defeat after two-and-a-half months is the version generally used in later accounts.

Nevertheless, a few newspaper accounts directly contradict this. "The cowboys strike in the Panhandle may be regarded as a success," reported the *Austin Weekly Statesman*. "Away out there none will dare attempt to take their places."¹³ The U.S. Commissioner chalked up a victory for the strikers, and offering the detailed breakdown of their raise in daily earnings from \$1.18 to \$1.68.

Of course, it may be that reports of defeat may reflect the actual proliferation of the strike, leading to different results in different places. At the same time as the strike in

¹¹ "Threatened Cowboy's Strike," *Las Vegas Daily Gazette*, March 18, 1883, 3; Untitled item, *Medicine Lodge KS Barbour County Index*, March 30, 1883, 1; "A Cowboy Strike [from *Texas Live Stock Journal*]," *Fort Worth Daily Gazette*, March 29, 1883, 6; "The Panhandle Trouble," *Las Vegas Daily Gazette*, April 19, 1883, 4, as well as "Trouble with the Cowboys," *Sacramento Daily Union*, March 26, 1883, 4; "Cowboys Strike," *Las Vegas Daily Gazette*, April 20, 1883, 1, essentially repeated as: "Cowboy's Strike," *Omaha Daily Bee*, April 20, 1883, 1; "Cowboy's Strike," *St. Paul Daily Globe*, April 26, 1883, 3. See also: Zeigler, "Cowboy Strike of 1883."

¹² Untitled item, *Dodge City Times*, May 10, 1883, 1; Zeigler, "Cowboy Strike of 1883."

¹³ Untitled item, *Austin Weekly Statesman*, April 26, 1883, 4. Jack Weston instinctively rebelled against the idea that the Panhandle fight over better pay had been a fiasco or a farce, but accepted the idea that the employers prevailed, though he suggested the strike may have had larger positive implications. Weston, *The Real American Cowboy*, 102-03.

the Panhandle, papers reported a strike telegraphed from Fort Supply in the Indian Territory. This was two hundred miles northeast of Tascosa in the general direction of the Kansas railheads. On April 23, several weeks after the victory in the panhandle, it reported the strike “ended, and some of the strikers have gone to work at former wages.”¹⁴ If correct, these defeated strikers had participated in a vastly larger movement than one restricted to the Tascosa area.

But the Panhandle strike was supposed to be the only one, right?

In fact, one account of the industry account “many labor strikes on the range.” Literature scholar Jack Weston found “slowdowns, threats, intimidating behavior, and collective defiance among cowboys.” Indeed, when the spring roundup came again in 1884, the panhandle cowboys went on strike once more, alongside strikes in New Mexico and “half a dozen or more outfits” on the lower Powder River in Wyoming, followed by strikes in the Sweetwater valleys “near the end of September 1884. Apparently, another strike broke out in the panhandle in 1885--the third year in a row--which deferred spring work considerably.”¹⁵ However, the deliberate policy of the employers involved minimizing their number, scale, and successes.

1886 saw cowboy strikes from Texas to Wyoming. In one case, about eighty cowboys attempted to organize themselves into the Northern New Mexico Small Cattlemen and Cowboy's Union, but the real battle came in Wyoming, when the well-organized bosses decided to slash wages, detonating strikes in at least four spring roundups in central and north Wyoming. A Montana paper reported, “Not a wheel moved until the foremen submitted to the terms made by a committee from among the cowboys, to the effect that no man should work on roundup 23 for less than \$40 a month.” Accounts from northeast Colorado reported in that “not a man is left on the range” that May. The strike won and the men returned to work at their old wages. Among the defeated was Joseph Carey, then president of the Wyoming stock Growers Association and future governor and U.S.

¹⁴ “Sherman. The Cowboy's Strike About Over--Those Horse Thieves--Light Frost,” *Dallas Daily Herald*, April 26, 1883, 1, and *Dallas Weekly Herald*, April 26, 1883, 7.

¹⁵ Gressley, *Bankers and Cattlemen*, 124, qtd in Weston, *The Real American Cowboy*, 91, also 88 and, 96; Untitled item, *Cheyenne Transporter*, May 12, 1886, 1.

Senator, who tried to get the organizers of the movement arrested but cowboys wouldn't finger each other.¹⁶

For what did these men practice such solidarity? Once bookkeeper on talked of "Jackson, the agitator," a supposedly Yale-educated radical who gave "anarchistic speeches" that sparked a strike. Some cowboys certainly did correspond with Joseph R. Buchanan's *Labor Inquirer* at Denver. Broncho John Sullivan, one of the articulate, militant cowboys discontented with the new order on the range went east, passing through several Wild West shows, and freely sharing his views with both *John Swinton's Paper* and with the daughter of Karl Marx, when she visited Cincinnati.¹⁷

Nevertheless, the one thing that the old stories promulgated by the cattle bosses got right was that many of the striker leaders came to violent ends. The big ranches saw to this by bringing organized bands of extralegal "regulators" to extirpate the blacklisted. On the range, the "blacklist" referred to rustlers as well as strikers. From the Panhandle to Wyoming, those who could hire and deploy more shooting irons preferred that method of settling disputes. A significant number of the organizers of the 1883 strike came to such an end. The successful strike leader of that year, Tom Harris was said to be in despair over the situation in 1890, when he took his own life.

Across the lands bloodied by the extermination of native peoples, stained with the systemic effort to break the will and identity of kidnapped and enslaved Africans, proved no less relentless in its handling of those Texas cowboys, however iconic they came to be of their own self-delusions.

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In a larger sense, the cowboy strikes represented the first signs of an explosive new kind of social discontent across the West. In 1888, Oldham County, the epicenter of those annual Panhandle strikes, provided 170 Union Labor ballots, around 39% of the total vote,

¹⁶ Untitled item, *Cheyenne Transporter*, May 12, 1886, 1; Richard W. Slatta, *The Cowboy Encyclopedia*, (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 361; Qtd. Weston, *The Real American Cowboy*, 97-98, also 99.

¹⁷ *Waterloo Courier*, April 1, 1891, 2; *Sioux County Herald*, April 8, 1891, 6; Malvern [IA] *Leader*, April 9, 1891, 2; *The Jackson Hustler*, April 17, 1891, ?; *Topeka State Journal*, April 25, 1891, 6; *The Hutchinson News*, May 1, 1891, 1; "A Cowboy Strike: the Strange Pranks of a Lot of Unruly Ranchmen," *Lawrence TN Lawrence Democrat*, May 1, 1891, 1; "A Strike on the Ranch," *Douglas WY Bill Barlow's Budget*, May 6, 1891, 7; "xx," *Middletown [NY] Daily Press*, June 27, 1892, 1.

vastly larger than the party won elsewhere in the area. If we acknowledge that the bosses and their supporters would hardly have cast such ballots, something like half of the number of the Southern white cowboy strikers from a few years before wound up voting for a party that explicitly practiced interracial cooperation against the restored Democratic power. In Wyoming, too, the strikes on the Powder River in Johnson County contributed to detonating the Johnson County War in 1892, and the subsequent groundswell for Populism there.¹⁸

Beneath the imagery of individual opportunity, conditions in the Panhandle demonstrated that the transition from a land where Indians hunted the buffalo to large-scale, commercial livestock raising with what amounted to enclosures and a rigid class system took place in a matter of years. The meaning of the cowboy strike of 1883 requires reaching beneath the self-interested--even fictionalized and falsified accounts--to draw upon to the wider issues of class, power and politics.

Such were matters as common amidst the sagebrush of the prairies as the cobblestones of Paris.

¹⁸ *Tribune Almanac and Political Register for 1892*, ed. Edward McPherson (New York: the Tribune Association, 1892), , 287.